



Information Brief

Youth Leadership/Student Empowerment

Rarely in schools are youth leadership and involvement strategies used for the positive development of at-risk youth. Typically, students who already have shown potential for positive leadership and who exhibit those skills are the ones tapped for leadership roles in schools. Those same leaders are the ones most likely to be engaged in a wide array of school activities. However, current research indicates that the risk for young people to develop problem behaviors is reduced when they possess buffers that potentially protect them from, or make them resilient to, problem behaviors. Among these protective factors are the development of pro-social skills and formulation of an attachment to school. Teaching students leadership skills and involving them in decision-making are proven strategies in positive development, especially in the healthy development of those at-risk. The instructional tools are available. Are the interest in and commitment to the work available as well?

CRITICAL ELEMENT ADDRESSED: *The school is a caring, respectful, encouraging community.*

- *Indicator: Skillful, non-judgmental adults treat students with dignity and respect, using a positive, caring manner.*
- *Essential Practices: Seek, recognize, value, and celebrate the contributions of all students. The school attends to issues of diversity by recognizing and capitalizing on the assets of students and acknowledging their individual differences.*
- *Indicator: The school approaches social, emotional and behavioral development and learning opportunities from a strength perspective that identifies and builds on personal assets.*

INTRODUCTION

A national survey of adults in the United States reported that more than 60 percent did not think youth would make the country a better place to live, and 20 percent felt that they would make the country worse (Farkas, Johnson, Dugget and Bers, 1997). However, youth recognize and develop leadership qualities if welcomed and valued as partners in all aspects of community life and actively engaged in efforts aimed at social and community change. Adults sometimes perceive at-risk students, who make up more than 10 percent of the population (MacGregor, 1998), as being “disposable.” When at-risk students and their advocates identify and put leadership qualities to use, the potential is more resilient students, stronger schools, and stronger communities.

“What drives an at-risk student to take a leadership role of involvement? They will typically not be involved in planning a prom or running a bake sale. Leadership generally revolves around finding meaning in their own life, having an influence on the choices of their peers, finding ways to resolve conflict without fighting and having greater control of personal issues.”

- MacGregor, 1998

Successful youth involvement depends on both youth and adults accepting responsibility for building positive relationships, respecting and valuing each other, and contributing to the community as citizens (Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development, June 2001). Many opportunities and experiences are

available for youth to enhance their leadership potential and to exercise their leadership abilities.

Placing at-risk youth in positions of leadership and implementing programs that foster involvement in school issues are not always top priorities of adults. Adults often do not see leadership development as a primary option for prevention of at-risk behavior, and they avoid tapping into the leadership potential of high-risk youth. Yet when group decision-making processes involve at-risk students in leadership positions, the students are able to shed light on school issues from their own perspectives and they also can see that their opinions are valued. This leads them to make better choices when dealing with difficulties in school and in their own daily lives

DEFINING LEADERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT

Youth, themselves, must define what leadership and involvement mean if they are to take active roles in school and community improvement. Youth who struggle each day to cope with life find it difficult to commit to school involvement and need to understand how being a leader will improve their lives. Asking youth to define leadership personally can identify the characteristics they perceive to be meaningful for leadership.

The National 4-H Council, in their booklet on the study *Youth in Decision Making*, stresses the benefits of including youth in positions of authority and leadership. These benefits also accrue when the school improvement planning process involves youth.

- ***Youth involvement becomes the expectation.*** An organization/school will see more youth willing to be involved in any group that has a youth governing it. When adult group members who are unwilling to

share power with young people leave the group, the group should replace them with individuals who accept youth participation in organizational decision-making.

- ***Young people clarify the organization's mission.*** Through formal and informal means, youth can become the keepers and protectors of the mission.
- ***Organizations become more connected and responsive to youth in the community.*** When youth are involved in planning, committees tend to be better able to match programming efforts to youth needs.
- ***Organizations place greater value on inclusivity and representation.*** Having youth involved in decision-making improves the representative nature of programs offered by the organization. Their focus on diversity and fairness tends to lead to policy changes and new conversations.
- ***Youth find the greatest purpose through direct action.*** Youth-infused organizations are highly likely to involve young people in advocacy, policy-making and service.

How can students be involved as leaders at school?

- Provide an environment where youth have the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership capabilities and where they are taken seriously.
- Be sensitive and understanding of at-risk youth's emerging leadership qualities — these students have not been “groomed” as leaders, as many have, and they are all too aware that they have not been marked as “leadership material” in the past.
- Lead a group “brainstorm” on the definition of leadership. This gives youth permission to set their own standards for leadership qualities.
- Leadership characteristics have the best chance to develop through activities which require everyone's participation — this provides students with opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned. As important as it is to teach a student to lead, it is equally important for that student to have the opportunity to lead others.
- Activities that may foster leadership and involvement include restoring parks, helping to prepare meals for those in need, painting murals to beautify school grounds, organizing after-school sports leagues, leading policy discussions in committee meetings and local debates to influence legislative issues relevant to their lives.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT

- **Web sites:**
 - Youth As Resources: www.yar.org
 - Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development: www.icyd.org
- **In this Handbook:** See “*Success4 Critical Elements*,” information briefs on *Youth Development*, *Frameworks*, *Resiliency*, and *Service-Learning*. For information beyond the scope of this handbook, refer to the Resources Section.

How can administrators promote student leadership?

Students develop a better understanding of school issues when they interact with staff, because they see the school from the staff's perspective. Administrators can foster student leadership in a variety of ways.

- Identify interested faculty and staff members who have influence with the students.
- Prepare staff to collaborate in school improvement before involving students in the process.
- Involve faculty, staff, students, and community members in the identification of students who may have influence with their peers.
- Establish guidelines for discussion of school issues.
- Organize groups of student leaders and adults to involve the student body in planning and implementing school improvement activities.
- Support efforts of these groups by allowing time for meetings and recognition of progress.

Involve Teens as Community Leaders

Developing youth interest in community improvement requires the involvement of influential adults and student leaders. When youth feel a strong sense of ownership of community projects, they are more likely to participate actively in seeing the project through.

The potential of most at-risk students to make positive contributions to the community is typically overlooked or undervalued. For many at-risk teens, day-to-day survival is a way of life, and future planning doesn't extend past today. When adult mentors reach this group, teaching the teens leadership skills will help them to redesign their tactics for dealing with everyday life. As they see that they have control of their own circumstances, the community becomes more important in their plan and they can envision being an involved leader.

SUMMARY

Youth must develop an interest in the school or community they will serve. With adult guidance in a nurturing environment, youth leadership qualities will surface and have the chance to develop. For many youth the most important benefit they receive from seeing themselves and having others view them as leaders is the ability to stand up for what they believe. Because at-risk students are painfully aware that others expect them to fail, these students won't take risks to make a positive difference in their lives. This awareness also makes them very receptive to those who do genuinely believe in their abilities. When these youth are encouraged to develop their inner leadership abilities, the change in their outlook and the quality of their contribution is immeasurable.